**Fair Isn’t Always Equal Reflections**

**Chapter 1 – The Differentiated Instruction Mind-Set**

Over winter break I read *Fair Isn’t Always Equal* by Rick Wormeli while traveling from Maine to beautiful Ecuador. So, it will be nice to re-read the book and pick up on things I previously missed and be able to express my thoughts through this blog. Chapter One acts as an introduction to the concept of Differential Instruction, which Rick Wormeli describes as “doing what’s fair for students (3).” It is what teachers do to help their students succeed to the best of their ability. To explain Differential Instruction Wormeli uses the analogy of a child with glasses. All the students do not have glasses, so they are not equal, yet it would not be fair to take away the glasses that a student needs to see with. The glasses are a metaphor for scaffolding and assistance, something that there is a bunch of in a classroom that is differentiated. Apparently there are critics to this mode of thinking, but I take it as doing everything possible to ensure that your students flourish.

Thinking back, there was plenty of differential instruction in my high school. I plan on modeling what I learned as well as developing upon these new ideas. Some of these concepts are common sense to me and that probably stems to how I was taught. Of course I’ll provide my students with graphic organizers if they need one. I know I will rephrase questions for students if they do not understand. Those are little things. I think Wormeli is trying to change the culture of teaching across the country. To us young bloods it seems like common sense but to others it may seem like being soft on students. Either way, the first chapter makes a lot of sense to me.

**Chapter 2 – Mastery**

The essential question of this chapter is something along the lines of, “How do we know if a student has mastered a concept?” Wormeli starts the chapter by trying to define mastery, which he proves is a slippery term to pin down. Everyone’s opinion of mastery is different. One definition I did not realize the relevance of the first time I read the book was Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins’ idea of the Six Facets of Learning. The same facets that we just used to create our Stage I lesson plans. It is interesting how much I am picking up the second time around. One idea that Wormeli discusses is having students write out how they got their final answer because it shows true mastery (15). This is one idea that I will start using immediately for my Statistic students. Concerning my more distant future, this idea works very well in a history class because much of the content is already expressed through spoken and written words.

One process I am nervous about is deciding what exactly my students should master and what I should leave out. When we are talking about history everything is connected. Leaving out parts of history is something that drastically alters the story being told. I feel like I will have trouble with teaching too much because I do not want to leave out important information. I agree that backwards planning and relying on colleagues will help me in this process. But, I still worry. I am sure with experience I will find the right balance between content and time.

Chapter 3 – Principles of Successful Assessment in the Differentiated Classroom

Rick Wormeli prefaced his book *Fair Isn’t Always Equal* by saying that the readers should have an open mind and that there will be stuff in here that we’ll disagree with. The beginning of Chapter Three introduces how a differentiated classroom assesses students. One thing that Wormeli proposes is for students to be given the final exam on the first day and allowed to keep it. He argues that the teacher should always have the end goal in mind when teaching. This backwards planning helps weed out what it important and what is not. I remember Dr. Lance Neeper did this last year in SED101. It was interesting to see how much I learned in just 7 weeks when comparing my two identical tests. I just do not know if I would leave the tests in the hands of my students for the whole unit.

Although I do not know if I follow Wormeli on every issue, I do agree that teachers must plan with the end in mind. To do this teachers must first establish their enduring questions that will act as the foundation for future lessons. From these essential understandings teachers create their pre, formative, and summative assessments. From these assessments teachers receive feedback, and that is where true progress can be made. With feedback comes learning and understanding. That is why Wormeli really stresses the importance of concise and timely assessment that captures how a student is doing in the class. Wormeli also says that teachers should allow for 100% make-up on all tests, which is something I am slowly starting to get behind.

**Chapter 4 – Three Important Types of Assessment**

One of the three assessment types strongly suggested by Rick Wormeli in Chapter 4 is requiring students to keep a portfolio of their work. This can either be digital or hardcopy, and I honestly like the sound of this idea. I think portfolios would really get the self-knowledge facet of learning because it would allow the students to easily reflect on their learning over time. The two other assessment types suggested are rubrics and student self-assessment. Concerning rubrics, I never realized how complicated they could be. My teachers often had rubrics in high school and it was nice to see what one had to do to achieve an A. But I never knew of all the different possibilities there are in rubric creation: holistic or analytic, how many categories, how should I label them? Even the words used to describe the categories should be considered. I like exceptional, strong, capable, developing, beginning, and emergent. I find sophisticated, mature, good, adequate, and naïve to be a little harsh sounding. It is a little over-whelming to see how much goes into creating rubrics.

The third assessment type suggested is using student self-assessments because it “provides invaluable feedback and helps students and their teachers set individual goals (51).” I remember often receiving these at the end of the year during high school. Thinking back, getting them at the end of the year did not really do much to further my learning. By then it was too late for the teacher to use that information because school was ending. Maybe when I am a teacher I will work student self-assessments into the middle of my unit. I like the idea of students keeping reflective journals, and the portfolio idea mentioned earlier could also be used as a self-assessment tool.

**Chapter 5 – Tiering Assessments**

In a differentiated classroom, tiering is often used to provide the right level of challenge to the right students. The example given in Chapter Five is how a teacher might tier a lesson about graphing mathematical equations. For Early Readiness Students certain aspects of the problem are given to the student to help them understand the concept. For Advanced Readiness Students the problem difficulty is increased, something “Ann Tomlinson calls ‘ratcheting’ up or down the challenge level (56).” It is my understanding that this is one of the hot items discussed about Differentiated Instruction. To some teachers it may seem like being easy on some students and harder on others. I believe Wormeli is trying to explain is that the job of teachers is to help students understand and learn. If providing tiering helps a student do so them I am all in. People learn at different speeds, so why not provide assistance where assistance is due?

Another suggestion to help tiering lessons is using a learning contract. I am less inclined to use this tool than learning menus, however. Learning menus are similar to “drop-down menus in a favorite word processing package” where a student can choose specific criteria they want to meet (62). The teacher establishes certain tasks that are non-negotiable. But, the student can set up their own checkpoints on progress and other areas they want to explore. The most appealing method of tiering to me is using the Tic-Tac-Toe Board, and I will certainly be using this in my classroom in the future. This concept allows students to fill out tasks in separate columns. Each task utilizes one of the multiple intelligences. I really like this idea and when I first read about it over winter break I instantly knew I wanted to implement it some day.

**Chapter 6 – Creating Good Test Questions**

If there was one thing I did not like about high school it was ambiguous test questions. The kind where I had to ask myself what the teacher wanted me to say. I agree with Rick Wormeli when he says that test questions like these have no place in a differentiated classroom. I do not think multiple-choice questions as a whole are wrong. I will probably use them in my future classroom. What Chapter 6 is trying to get to is that a successful differentiated classroom uses several “traditional and non-traditional questions and prompts (75).” Traditional problems are things such as multiple-choice questions and essays. Some non-traditional examples are things such as exclusion brainstorming and analogies. My Ecology professor last year had many different types of prompts on his tests throughout the year. From graphs, to short essays, to multiple choice and matching. His tests were hard but also really nice. I envision my tests to be similar to what his were like.

Much of Chapter 6 contains do’s and don’ts about phrasing and structuring test questions. Tips such as avoiding confusing negatives, making prompts clear, avoiding repeating similar questions too much, and being wary of timed tests. One tip I liked was to try and make questions fun. I do this with my Supplemental Instruction students. I often create silly questions concerning football players, flamingos, or deodorant. I think it makes completing a math problem that much more fun, which is beneficial because making people who normally hate math enjoy it just a little more is a win.